

Practical Reasons and Moral ‘Ought’

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Morality is a source of reasons for action, what philosophers call practical reasons. Kantians say that it ‘gives’ reasons to everyone. We can even think of moral requirements as *amounting to* particularly strong or stringent reasons, in an effort to demystify deontological views like Kant’s, with its insistence on inescapable or ‘binding’ moral requirements or ‘oughts.’¹ When we say that someone morally ought not to harm others, perhaps all we are saying is that he has a certain kind of reason not to, one that wins out against any opposing reasons such as those touting benefits to him of ignoring others’ concerns.

Philosophers may feel the need for a deeper understanding of reasons, but interpreted essentially as facts relating acts and agents—considerations counting in favor of or against someone’s performing a certain act—moral reasons at any rate would not seem to involve any intrinsic moral properties of acts, of the sort that people used to worry about even for less extreme examples than Kant’s of a deontological approach to ethics. We need to refer to reasons in any case to understand ordinary non-moral cases of rational deliberation and action. So it is now common, for instance, to substitute for Ross’s notion of *prima facie* duties talk of *pro tanto* reasons, reasons counting in favor of or against some act as far as they go, but capable of being defeated by opposing reasons.

The explanation of moral ‘ought’ in terms of practical reasons might seem to lend support, though, to contemporary Kantian arguments that practical rationality is all one needs to supply the impulse to be moral, with Nagel’s *The Possibility of Altruism* as a primary source.² Even granting that an agent might be rational and yet not fully aware of the reasons bearing

¹ Because the term ‘obligation’ has some implications that do not pertain to ‘ought,’ let me deviate from English idiom and use the verb ‘ought’ as a noun. An ought is what we have when the verb applies, i.e. when we ought to do something. Henceforth I use quotes only when referring to the word or concept.

² See Nagel (1970).

on a particular act (he might, for instance, be unaware that a certain act would cause others harm), if he is aware of a reason, how could he possibly justify a failure to be moved by it, except by appeal to opposing reasons he considers just as strong?

Some recent work on practical reasons weakens the force of a reason, in effect, by defending a subclass of *optional* reasons—reasons such that knowingly failing to act on them, without any equally strong opposing reasons, is compatible with practical rationality. In Joseph Raz's terms, reasons as such do not *require* action but merely render it 'eligible' for choice.³ From the standpoint of rationality, then, not all undefeated reasons are compelling reasons. Some authors go further and assign a lesser normative force to certain reasons: what Jonathan Dancy marks off as merely 'enticing' (as opposed to 'peremptory') reasons, and Joshua Gert calls 'justifying' (as opposed to 'requiring') reasons.⁴ If moral reasons, or even just some of them, are rationally compelling—inescapable in the sense of demanding obedience of all rational agents, as well as *applying* to all of them—we need to do more than insist on their status or strength as *reasons* to explain why.

We might just insist that their status as *moral* reasons is enough to make them compelling. But left in such general terms, this strikes me as mere table-pounding that at best is a last resort. Instead, I would hope that an account of what is involved in rationally *discounting* certain reasons would enable us to pinpoint the fundamental error (as opposed to the irrationality) of someone who recognizes moral reasons but is not motivated by them—what I call a 'reasons-amoralist.' I have a somewhat different way of making out optional versus compelling reasons—in terms of a conception of practical reasons as offering or answering criticism—that will support such an account. It should still allow us to use the notion of a reason to capture binding moral oughts, on a deontological view more or less in the spirit of Kant, but without any claim that an agent who deliberately flouts a moral ought must be irrational.

In short, then, my aim here is to defend the interpretation of strong or binding moral 'ought' in terms of practical reasons within an appropriately loose general conception of practical reasons. My strategy is, first, to sketch the main lines of a 'critical' conception of practical reasons that allows one to recognize some consideration as a reason while turning it down as

³ See Raz (1999: e.g. p. 65).

⁴ See Dancy (2004) and Gert (2004: chs. 2–6). My own view overlaps with both authors', particularly Gert's. However, Gert understands reasons in terms of rationality and takes the latter notion as ruling out mistakes about one's reasons (cf., e.g. his treatment of Scanlon on irrationality vs. mistake on p. 215). I discuss differences from Dancy in Greenspan (2005).

a motive. Then, in the central argument of this paper, I show how the view can handle the reasons-amoralist. I go on to answer a different but related challenge to the attempt to understand ‘ought’ in terms of reasons, as suggested by recent work on undetachable conditional oughts.

REASONS, DISCOUNTING, AND ENTITLEMENT

My central argument amounts to a defense of externalism—in several varieties, which I attempt to sort out in my next section, but in the first instance, reasons externalism, since it lets a rational agent simply reject some acknowledged reasons as motives. Bernard Williams’s defense of reasons internalism ultimately turned on insistence that the notion of a practical reason made sense only as a potential motivator.⁵ But there is an alternative conception of practical reasons that loosens the tie to motivation, even granting that the usual point of acknowledging a reason is indeed to motivate—to guide or influence action, one’s own or others’. What is essential to a practical reason on the critical conception is instead a relation to criticism: a practical reason serves either to offer a criticism—meaning a potential criticism, not necessarily one that is put to the agent—or to answer one, by citing some valuable feature of the act or other practical option in question. The normative role of a reason is thus either critical or defensive—or some combination of the two. This is in contrast to a common conception of practical reasons as essentially action-guiding, which I think Williams assumes. More generally, the critical conception represents an alternative to understanding reasons in terms of ends, whether an agent’s actual ends or some independent notion of what has value.

The critical conception instead emphasizes disvalue by shifting the normative spotlight to negative reasons—reasons against, or one might say ‘cons.’ It makes out the normative function of positive reasons (reasons in favor, or ‘pros’) in terms of what negative reasons supply, namely criticism. Though discussions of practical reasons usually focus on examples of positive reasons, this shift fits well with ought-based approaches to morality, since requirements, though expressed in positive form, have to be explained in terms of negative reasons, considerations counting against alternatives to the acts they require.

To illustrate with a non-moral example what I have in mind by a negative reason, consider the reason commonly cited against smoking: that it causes

⁵ See Williams (1981: esp. pp. 108–9; cf. 1995: 39). Korsgaard (1986) formulates internalism to require only that reasons have the *capacity* to motivate, but she interprets this as making an exception only for irrational cases.

cancer. Note that what is said to be negative here is neither the content of the reason (the relation of smoking to cancer is not naturally expressed by a negation) nor the act that the reason is cited against (smoking is not a mere omission), but rather the *bearing* of the reason on the act: that its relation to cancer does or would count *against* smoking. On the kind of reasons externalist view I favor, it would have that bearing even without having action-guiding force for a given agent—if she were indifferent to the prospect of contracting cancer, say, and lacked any other desires that would be frustrated by it, or at any rate weighted them less heavily than the advantages of smoking—as long as ill health could still be said to frustrate her interests.

On the basis of the same sorts of considerations, I also have a reason to get a certain amount of exercise; this is stated in positive form, but it is negative in my sense insofar as it counts against some alternative that excludes it, such as leading too sedentary a life. Indeed, any reason capable of generating a practical requirement has to be seen as negative in this sense. To apply this to a moral example: an altruistic reason in a given case has to count against acting solely in self-interest, if it is to yield anything stronger than a *recommendation* of altruistic action. To grant this is not to deny, though, that reasons that simply cite valuable features of acts or other practical options might play an important role in morality, particularly in relation to the virtues, as ideals of human behavior. In motivational terms, as incentives to action, they may be at least as important as negative reasons. I think of them as 'purely' positive reasons, counting in favor of an option but without implying significant criticism of alternatives. I assign them a secondary role, though, in moral or other normative systems meant to supply a standard of correctness in action, not just a scale of better and worse. In the first instance, on my account, purely positive reasons serve to ground permissions, defending the favored option against whatever criticisms it might be subject to itself, and supporting recommendations insofar as some options are more defensible than others.

I limit attention to ought-based ethics in the discussion that follows, though my comments should apply to any version of ethics that can generate practical requirements. If we allow for optional reasons, eudaimonism and similar views that might be thought to be based on purely positive reasons would have to allow for an important, if implicit, element of negativity in my sense—to count a life lacking in *eudaimonia* as deficient and thus to be avoided—if they are to generate anything stronger than practical recommendations. My concern in this paper is just to handle a problem posed by optional reasons for views that attempt to make reasons the basis for strong moral 'ought.'

To minimize verbal complexity I also make a number of other simplifying assumptions in what follows. For instance, though I am working from the

standard view of practical reasons as objective—as amounting to facts independent of the agent’s beliefs about them—I sometimes follow our natural way of speaking and refer to reason-judgments or -statements as reasons (not always spelling out ‘practical’ reasons), on the assumption that they fit the facts. My talk of reasons on the critical conception as ‘offering’ or ‘answering’ criticism is a case in point: more strictly I should say that reasons can be cited as part of a criticism or in answer to a criticism, or that they ground or are based on or amount to criticisms or answers to criticism, but these longer-winded formulations are clumsier and less perspicuous.

Elsewhere, focusing on non-moral cases, I introduce the critical conception as a general view of practical reasons and begin to answer some of the many likely objections to the distinction I derive from it, between purely positive and negative reasons.⁶ The distinction is easily misunderstood, in part because these terms might seem to make it out as a distinction in surface form. Though I introduce it as a distinction between reasons in favor and reasons against, my treatment of requirements should make it clear that some reasons naturally stated in positive form really imply negative reasons and hence are not *purely* positive in my intended sense. Indeed, the logic of reasons would let us restate even purely positive reasons in negative form, since a reason *for* something implies at least a trivial reason *against* something else, namely omitting it.

For a simple example of reason that would count as purely positive in my sense—later I introduce a meatier case and focus discussion on variants of it—consider my choice between two blazers in my closet that differ only in color. Supposing that green happens to be my most flattering color, this counts as a reason in favor of choosing the green; and trivially, of course, it yields a reason against *not* choosing the green, which counts against choosing any other blazer, if we rule out wearing two blazers at once. However, the blue blazer also looks perfectly fine on me, so on a day when I have no particular reason for looking my absolute best, it would seem to do just as well. The fact that the green would look better does not yield any significant criticism of choosing the blue, of the sort that would keep it from counting as a purely positive reason on my understanding of the notion.

While recognizing problems with this semi-technical use of common terms, I think I do need something of the sort to convey the distinction I have in mind, and the only alternatives I can think of seem to be either no less technical than ‘positive/negative’ or more seriously misleading in application to moral cases. But since some readers might find a less formal way of representing the distinction helpful to keep in mind, let me mention two other possibilities. We might, for instance, recast the distinction in

⁶ See Greenspan (2005), (unpublished-a), and (unpublished-b).

terms drawn directly from the critical conception of reasons and contrast 'defensive' with 'critical' reasons. However, I think these terms for different sorts of normative force would be misleading in application to cases insofar as they ignore the motivational aspect of reasons. (The recommended motive for altruistic action, say, is not to defend oneself against moral criticism.) Instead, we might modify Raz's talk of (positive) reasons as rendering options eligible for choice and distinguish between 'qualifying' and 'disqualifying' reasons. But that would be misleading in some ways too, since part of my point is that reasons counting against an option *tend* to disqualify it—to rule it out as unworthy of choice—but would not actually succeed in doing so in cases where the agent legitimately discounts them. So instead of switching terminology, let me stay with 'positive' versus 'negative' and invite the reader to fill in either of these alternative formulations, if it seems to convey more.

I call a reason purely positive, then, in cases where it tends to qualify an option for choice without disqualifying any competing options. This presupposes a threshold of adequate value, so that competing options may still be accepted as worth choosing, where they exceed the threshold, even though the reason in question does not apply to them. An example I use elsewhere involves a choice between staying on the Riviera, where I now am enjoying a long-planned vacation, and traveling on to Rome, which I would enjoy even more. A unique advantage of Rome—that the coliseum, which I have yet to see, is there, say—gives a reason in favor of traveling on, but assuming that my current vacation is working out well enough, either choice would be within reason.⁷ In representing a certain option as choiceworthy in some respect, a purely positive reason does not represent alternatives as objectionable or problematic and hence does not yield a significant criticism of them; the fact that it fails to apply to them can be said to amount to a reason against them, but only a trivial reason.

In this paper, however, I want to make relatively short shrift of the issues surrounding purely positive reasons in order to focus on metaethical issues raised by negative reasons—reasons of the sort that, if not discounted, would yield requirements. I want to say that such reasons may be *rendered* optional in a given case by the agent's appeal to higher-order reasons to discount them. This is in contrast to simply recognizing a reason as optional in virtue of the sort of bearing it has on action. In the present section I discuss discounting in general terms, moving in my next section to the question of its application to moral reasons.

A purely positive reason—a reason that serves just to answer (potential) criticism of an act or other practical option, without implying significant

⁷ See Greenspan (unpublished-b) and (unpublished-c).

criticism of alternatives—is discountable (legitimate to discount) at will. We can think of it as offering an opportunity rather than imposing a requirement, even on the assumption (which I make for all cases of optional reasons discussed here) that it defeats any opposing reasons. In other words, it cites a valuable enough feature of action to answer any applicable criticism, leaving the agent a choice as to whether to act in light of the valuable feature or instead in light of the criticism. So a mere appeal to preference on a particular occasion will be enough to explain a decision not to act on it.

To illustrate this, consider my reasoning a few years ago in response to an administrator who tried to supply a pure incentive for service on extradepartmental committees by citing the possibility of thereby gaining power in the University. I would not deny that the administrator offered me a reason to serve on a committee, insofar as power would be a benefit to me. But citing my lack of interest in power seems to be enough to rebuff his appeal—assuming it does not really mask appeal to something negative, a stick lurking behind the carrot, such as some likely bad consequence of my failure to gain power. This would be so even if we suppose that I have enough time and energy during a given term to add committee service to my other obligations and priorities.

By contrast, discounting a negative reason, as involved in a requirement, needs defense in terms of further, higher-order reasons. *Bartleby's* line, 'I prefer not to,' will not be adequate, if the aim is to back up the rationality of deciding not to.⁸ But one can sometimes give a higher-order reason for 'bracketing' a certain class of reasons. In his early work on reasons and the law Raz explains 'exclusionary' reasons as reasons for excluding certain first-order reasons from consideration.⁹ The fact that the law requires something is supposed to block us from placing deliberative weight on reasons that would otherwise count against it. We still recognize them as reasons, that is, but exclude them from deliberation.

An exclusionary reason does not outweigh first-order reasons but rather essentially outranks them (though it might itself be countered by competing second-order reasons). Raz's notion is introduced as explaining the sense in which legal reasons are authoritative, but it also is meant to help clarify various concepts extending to individual practical reasoning. Raz makes out a decision, for instance, in terms of both first- and second-order reasons, or what we may think of as reasons on two levels: at the lower level, a first-order reason in favor of carrying out the decision, and above it, a second-order reason excluding any competing first-order reasons from consideration. Appealing to a decision one has made to discount certain first-order reasons, then, would not necessarily mean ascribing greater

⁸ See Melville (1853).

⁹ See Raz (1990: 37–45).

strength to the competing first-order reason stemming from the decision. What gives a decision 'binding' force is instead the higher level of the second-order, exclusionary reason.

Given Raz's focus on the law, one might think of exclusionary reasons as buttressing the authority of certain first-order reasons. But they do so only by undermining the authority of others—including some we might think authoritative insofar as they otherwise would yield requirements. An example of this is provided by Scanlon's recent suggestion of a 'structural' account of reasons whereby, instead of comparing reasons in terms of strength of desire, we bracket some reasons as inappropriate to a given context—discounting personal concerns, say, such as regard for an opponent's hurt feelings, in playing a competitive game.¹⁰ However, Scanlon's examples of second-order reasons seem to involve *disallowing* action on the first-order reasons in question, rather than making it optional, which would depend on also taking the second-order reasons as optional. His examples also suggest that discounting a reason means denying it the status of a reason—declaring it irrelevant to the choice at hand. On the account I am taking from Raz, all the agent denies to a reason in discounting it is a role in his deliberation, which I treat as tantamount to denying it motivational force. The discounted reason still is acknowledged as justifying action—if the agent should choose to act in light of it, after all.

The critical conception affords a way of granting an agent multiple levels of optional reasons without threat of regress. Consider a modified version of the power case involving negative first-order reasons. Suppose I do need to serve on a University committee this term in order to correct a deficit in my current level of power. How can it still be rational—meaning 'within reason,' whether or not the most prudent thing to do—for me to turn down that option? By hypothesis, I am not in a position to cite equally weighty first-order reasons against it, such as those I might have for instead completing a paper by a deadline this term. Whatever benefits I stand to accrue from completing the paper on time would be less than those of committee service, say. But in turning down the administrator's appeal, it would seem to be enough for me just to cite a decision I have made to stress intellectual aims over political. That would not necessarily satisfy the administrator, but if defense of my rationality is what is in question, I think it is all I need to say, at least assuming that the consequences of my power deficit will not be *dire*. I have a certain leeway, that is, to discount some harms to myself—remaining without input into matters that concern me, such as class size, for instance—in favor of aims I choose to stress.

¹⁰ See Scanlon (1998: 50–5).

What we have here is an intrapersonal analogue of self-sacrifice for others, which comes under the category of supererogation in the moral sphere. I am sacrificing some of my interests to a purpose of my own, and am within my rights to do so, rationally speaking. Raz in fact has a subcategory of exclusionary reasons, 'exclusionary permissions,' that he interprets as entitlements and applies to supererogation.¹¹ What I would call the source of entitlement in the power-deficit case is a *non-stringent personal ideal*—an ideal that the agent does not take to rule out an occasional deviation, though it provides him with a second-order reason to avoid deviating: a purely positive reason and therefore optional. In a case of supererogation, similarly, an agent need not be committed to sacrificing himself to others as a general rule in order to be doing so with adequate reason in a given case. So I would also be within my rights to accept the administrator's appeal and serve on an occasional committee to gain some power.

My account of the power-deficit case is somewhat complex—with a different defense of optionality for the different levels of reasons in play—but I think the complexity is needed to capture it as a case of genuine options that does not threaten a regress of appeals to higher-order reasons. My treatment of the case is meant to show that we can have optional reasons all the way up, but without going on forever, even where what is in question at the initial level is the sort of reason that without discounting would yield a requirement. Moreover, my reasons remain optional even if we suppose that my options in the case are commensurable, in contrast to the cases that Raz in his later work takes to involve optional reasons.¹² I also have the option of accepting the administrator's appeal. With a purely positive reason at the upper level, I need no further reason to justify discounting *it*.

There are other cases of optionality where one discounts a first-order reason by setting a threshold of practical attention, rather than priorities—dismissing certain harms or benefits to oneself (such as the cancer risks of 'red dye #7' and similar food ingredients, or small increases in the length or quality of one's life above a reasonable level) as too minor to have to bother with in deliberation, though not so trivial that paying some attention to them would be irrational. A feature of all my cases of discounted negative reasons is that they involve decisions, as sources of further reasons that might be said to be 'enacted' by the agent, rather than

¹¹ See Raz (1990: 89–90). The addition of Raz's terminology to my own may make my discussion rather cumbersome at times, but the tie to a well-known systematic account of reasons seems to me worth exploiting. Let me stress that my focus on cases of self-sacrifice is not meant to suggest that these exhaust the category of supererogation.

¹² Cf. Raz (1990: 96–105 ff.).

simply existing external to his will, as considerations to which he can or must respond in specified ways. An agent essentially gives himself a reason by setting a threshold, or setting priorities, for practical attention. In the words of a familiar 'self-help' affirmation: I 'give myself permission to say no' to the administrator who appeals to considerations of power in order to get me to serve on committees.

If we build in Raz's account of decision as yielding both higher- and lower-order reasons, a non-arbitrary decision would take us to third-order reasons, but as long as we have purely positive reasons at some level, we should be able to allow for optional first-order reasons without regress.¹³ I do not mean to suggest, of course, that an agent explicitly makes appeal even to two levels of reasons as part of ordinary deliberation, but just that he is aware of reasons on several levels as available to justify what he does. But now the question before us is why someone could not just similarly give himself permission to discount moral requirements, or reasons of the sort that would otherwise yield requirements? I approach this question by considering a variant of a familiar figure in metaethics: the amoralist.

PINPOINTING THE REASONS-AMORALIST'S ERROR

The standard figure of the amoralist featured in contemporary discussion is someone who accepts moral judgments and yet, without irrationality, fails to be motivated by them. The possibility of such an agent is called into question by what is now distinguished as 'judgment internalism'—or more precisely, what we might call 'moral judgment internalism': the view that motivational force is internal to the meaning of a moral judgment, so that there could not conceivably be a rational agent who accepted a moral judgment but was not at all motivated to act accordingly. Elsewhere I have defended the possibility of such an agent on the basis of an understanding of the institution of moral language as dependent on a general tie to motivation that allows for exceptions in individual cases; I took myself to be defending a version of externalism, on the usual conception of internalism as a doctrine about the meaning of any particular moral judgment, though I noted that the view also allows for a general version of internalism.¹⁴

¹³ Raz's account would also elude the argument against giving oneself a reason simply by forming a first-order intention in Broome (2001). I discuss further limitations of Broome's arguments in my final section.

¹⁴ See Greenspan (1995: esp. pp. 70–1; cf. pp. 121–2 for early discussion of the distinction between positive and negative reasons, but in application specifically to

'Reasons internalism' is the term now used to distinguish from judgment internalism Williams's view that an agent's reasons can include only considerations capable of being brought to bear on his existing desires or other motivations by rational (meaning rationally unobjectionable) deliberation. I noted above that the critical conception of practical reasons allows for at least some reasons that do not fit this view. But the figure I now want to discuss under the heading of the 'reasons-amoralist' connects more directly to a version of judgment internalism that departs from the usual version, moral judgment internalism, in that the judgments in question are judgments that one has a reason—with the term 'moral' taken as qualifying the reason, rather than the judgments. In the first instance, what fails to motivate the reasons-amoralist is the judgment that he has a moral reason to do something. A denial of the possibility of the reasons-amoralist (on the standard conception of an amoralist as a rational agent) might be spelled out as 'moral reasons-judgment internalism.' Here, too, I would make out my own view as externalist, but as possibly fitting within a broader notion of internalism. I discuss this issue toward the end of the present section, with a suggestion in hand as to where one sort of reasons-amoralist may be going wrong.

The reasons-amoralist, then, is a rational agent who does recognize moral reasons but discounts them as factors affecting his choice of action. He does not think they are defeated by other first-order reasons; rather, he thinks he has adequate higher-order reasons for discounting them. In the kind of case I have in mind, rather than simply making an arbitrary exception of himself, he appeals to a non-stringent version of a Nietzschean ideal of freedom from moral constraints. This might be thought of as a case of 'principled' discounting, discounting by appeal to a further reason (citing the value of achievement or creativity, say), in contrast to 'preferential' discounting, discounting simply at will, of the sort I explained as applying to purely positive reasons. However, the agent's principles do not *require* him to violate morality (as on what I assume would be Nietzsche's own view); they simply permit or entitle him to do so.

In thus arrogating authority to himself to discount moral requirements, the reasons-amoralist is of course doing something morally wrong. He is acting on the basis of an objectionable moral view, and in that sense making a mistake in normative ethics. But on at least some versions of the case, I think we can say more than this, something metaethical, while retaining the assumption of rationality. The point is not to convince him to change his ways, but just to spell out something objectionable in non-moral

motivating states). I see that Blackburn (1998: pp. 61 ff.), simply incorporates this view into internalism; cf. also Gert (2002: esp. 299).

terms about the way he treats his reasons. I take it that an error may be extreme or deep enough to count as a kind of delusion, even though it falls short of irrationality—at any rate in the narrower sense that distinguishes irrationality from mistakes about one's reasons.¹⁵ According to the general account I have given, unresponsiveness to first-order reasons can sometimes be justified by appeal to higher-order reasons, but I want to say that one would have to be in some way deluded—albeit perhaps willfully (and perhaps even strategically) so—to apply this to moral reasons.

We might think of the reasons-amoralist as a kind of moral megalomaniac—extending the term a bit, in the manner of the popular use of 'paranoid,' to cases that are not pathological but involve such inflation of reality (in the present case, self-inflation) that it seems an odd understatement just to call the agents in question mistaken. Instead, we naturally think of such agents as deluded (in cases of self-inflation, grandiose), but again canceling out implications of pathology and taking these terms to apply to something like a pattern of serious distortion.

A megalomaniac in the usual sense has fantasies of unlimited power, among other things; here what is in question is authority. One possibility would be to attribute to the reasons-amoralist some sort of bizarre metaphysical view, on the model of Nagel's charge of practical solipsism, leveled against an agent who does not see others' good as directly providing him with reasons. But the sort of amoralist who fits my account of optional reasons does see others' good as providing him with reasons. The problem is that he thinks he is entitled to discount those reasons, presumably on the basis of features he has that others lack.

Of course, the reasons-amoralist might just be mistaken about his own abilities or prospects of achievement or the like. Even if such delusion involves bias in the gathering and assessment of evidence, and hence a kind of *theoretical* irrationality, it need not be seen as practically irrational, any more than the less extreme evidential biases that apparently result in a somewhat inflated self-image on the part of successful individuals.¹⁶

¹⁵ See McDowell (1978) and Scanlon (1998: 25 ff.); Scanlon later refers to his 'narrow' sense of irrationality (on which one can count as rational even if deeply confused) as the 'structural' sense; see Scanlon (forthcoming). These authors of course have in mind a mistake consisting in simple failure to recognize some reason, whereas I add a further kind of mistake about the nature of moral reasons in what follows.

¹⁶ Cf. Mele (2001), for a defense of self-deception in terms of bias in gathering and assessing evidence; Mele cites Gilovich (1991: 77), on the tendency toward self-inflation. In popular venues I have also read of studies establishing a correlation between the tendency to overoptimism and high achievement—suggesting that certain kinds of evidential bias can even be *ideally* rational in practical terms, albeit theoretically irrational. Cf. my own account of strategic self-trickery in generating emotions in Greenspan (2000).

More fundamentally, even if the reasons-amoralist is right about the facts, he inflates his appropriate role in relation to moral reasons by failing to appreciate fully their social basis. We can use the critical conception of practical reasons to charge him with a *normative* delusion, about where he stands in relation to the sources of moral reasons, rather than either a metaphysical or a factual delusion about his own or others' existence or nature. For at bottom what he fails to see, or to take in properly, is that he is in no position to waive the criticism supporting a moral reason, understood as a criticism lodged by others on their own behalf.

In the case of discounting that I defended above as an intrapersonal analogue to self-sacrifice for others, the agent chose to sacrifice some interests of her own to aims she preferred to stress. The underlying assumption was that whatever negative reason was in play offered a criticism that was essentially her own. It represented a certain action as in some way problematic or objectionable from her standpoint. So it is appropriate for her also to waive the right to issue it, given that an agent has authority to commit her future self. While it is always possible that she will later change her mind and regret not acting on the reason, in discounting it she commits herself to withholding the relevant criticism.

The contrast is to reasons whose underlying criticism has its source in another agent's standpoint.¹⁷ It does not make any clear sense—rather than just being morally questionable—to claim authority to commit others to withholding criticism. So the reasons-amoralist, while he accepts others' good as providing reasons, and is unconfused about their first-order bearing on his action, shows by his second-order discounting of them that he fails to understand that what ultimately makes them moral reasons—or more specifically, 'core' moral reasons, the sort that ground altruistic requirements. In that sense, he is making a mistake *about* his reasons, since

¹⁷ For a discussion of 'bipolar' reasons see Thompson (2004). I was led to Thompson's article by Wallace (unpublished), which was delivered at the 2005 University of Maryland Conference on Practical Rationality. Wallace uses the notion of bipolar reasons in a contractualist defense of a variant of the optional/compelling reasons distinction applicable to moral rather than rational requirement. His argument equates bipolar reasons with moral reasons, at least in the sense that Scanlon marks off as 'what we owe to others.' Thompson himself thinks of them as a subset of moral reasons, which he identifies as reasons of justice; but perhaps this is meant in the broader sense of classical philosophy. At any rate, I take the reasons in question here to include those commonly referred to as altruistic, following Nagel (1970). In Greenspan (1995), chs. 3 and 6, and Greenspan (1998) I sketch a noncontractualist way of making out socially based ethics, in terms of virtues of social groups, in effect appealing to an interpersonal standpoint that an individual agent would not be in a position to discount. Perhaps a consequentialist might use the distinction between 'agent-relative' and 'agent-neutral,' as formulated for reasons and value in Nagel (1986: 164–75), to limit discounting to reasons based on criticism relative to the standpoint of the agent.

he fails to appreciate fully what moral reasons amount to. Besides reflecting how his acts affect others' welfare, as he recognizes, moral reasons accord a certain authority to others over what counts as acceptable influence. A justification has to be addressed to them.

On this account, the reasons-amoralist would seem to be making a *metaethical* error—in a sense of 'metaethical' somewhat broader than the traditional sense, in which metaethics was limited to questions about the meanings of moral terms, concepts, or judgments. I think most people working in metaethics now construe the subject more broadly, to include metaphysical, epistemological, logical, and moral-psychological as well as semantical questions about ethics, though the narrower conception is still widely assumed by philosophers working in other areas (who often are averse to metaethics on grounds that depend on it). I take it that, in discounting moral reasons, the reasons-amoralist is not deluded about the semantics of moral reason-judgments, but rather about their practical implications, since he misunderstands the sources of moral reasons. Besides recognizing the reasons in question in objective terms—recognizing the facts that constitute them—he recognizes them as moral in the sense that they concern others' welfare, which I think is the common view.

This sort of rough-and-ready characterization of morality is enough for us to allow that the reasons-amoralist uses the term 'moral reasons' with the same *meaning* as most of us, though he exhibits a deficient understanding of the term, in a sense of 'understanding' that includes more than meaning. He does acknowledge its social reference, but he thinks that can be adequately handled without going beyond his own deliberative standpoint. He is not just using the term in an 'inverted commas' sense, if that means attributing it to common usage or a figure of speech, without endorsement.¹⁸ He has the usual concept of a moral reason, we might say, but he exhibits a deficient conception of moral reasons (or more precisely, of core moral reasons in ought-based ethics, of the sort in question here), when he fails to acknowledge their basis in criticism from standpoints other than his own. Similarly, I have the concept of a quark and *mean* the same thing as a scientist does when I use the term, though my conception of a quark no doubt omits much that a scientist would say is essential to understanding the nature of quarks and possibly contains some errors. I can use 'quark' meaningfully without really knowing what quarks are.

Allowing for the reasons-amoralist as a rational (though metaethically deluded) agent who recognizes moral reasons but is not motivated by them involves rejecting internalism, understood as a view about motivation and

¹⁸ Cf. Hare (1965: 189–90). Let me thank Michael Smith for raising this issue in discussion.

meaning—a view that takes motivation as ‘internal to’ the meaning of a moral judgment (which I take to include a moral reasons-judgment), so that anyone who sincerely makes the judgment must be motivated by it. However, one might suggest that internalism should now be understood more broadly, in line with the broader notion of metaethics: we should interpret ‘meaning’ to include a full understanding of the moral reason-judgments in question, which would require acknowledging the social basis of (core) morality, as the reasons-amoralist fails to do.

In order to rule out all varieties of amoralism, though, internalists in this extended sense would seem to have to incorporate into meaning the answers to many disputed metaethical questions. There is disagreement, for instance, about whether moral reasons can ever be overridden by non-moral considerations; presumably those who deny this would also deny that non-moral reasons can ever be higher-order than moral reasons. If they are right, and we accept internalism in the extended sense, agents who claim to be acting appropriately in acting against a moral reason would be dismissed as not really meaning *moral*—along with any metaethical theorists who take the opposing view. The result would tend to trivialize or undermine metaethical debate—it reminds me a bit of redefining ‘God’ in such broad terms that no one can call himself a non-believer—so I resist broadening the notion of internalism and continue to call myself an externalist.

My remarks here have focused on one sort of reasons-amoralist (which is all we need to defend the possibility of such an agent)—not just the sort who happens to be indifferent to moral reasons, but rather someone who discounts them in a principled fashion, by appeal to a higher-order reason, but a reason appealing to a merely personal ideal, by analogy to my power-deficit case in the preceding section. I think the common picture of a Nietzschean ‘free spirit,’ though, would be of someone who assigns his ideal an impersonal value and hence sees his pursuit of it as indeed answering criticisms from other standpoints. Perhaps he thinks that the value of achievement or creativity should be recognized by all agents as outweighing any independent forms of disvalue, such as harms his promotion of those ideals might inflict on agents incapable of pursuing them as well as he. This kind of case would seem to involve an objectionable *normative* assessment of moral reasons, rather than a metaethical misconception of them. Where the agent in question is not deluded about the facts, about his own prospects of achievement or creativity, all we could charge him with would be moral error. But optional reasons are not in question in this normative ethical version of the case. Here the agent appeals only to higher-order negative reasons, reasons that would rule out assigning greater weight to first-order reasons against inflicting certain harms.

The point of lodging the charge of metaethical error against my own version of the reasons-amoralist was to keep my defense of optional reasons from undermining binding moral 'ought.' The only relevant version of the reasons-amoralist I can think of whose error might seem to lie within normative ethics would be an agent who subscribes to one of the views invented to contrast with ethical egoism in introductory ethics texts, 'first-person egoism.' A first-person egoist thinks that everyone morally ought to promote *his* (the egoist's) good. But while this is a normative *view*, it might still be based on metaethical error, such as an error about the point and purposes of morality and about what sort of conception of practical reasons could support it. For as thus described, a first-person egoist is someone who accepts a certain moral view, not just an agent who characteristically acts in accordance with it. The view implies that his reasons always outweigh those (if he recognizes any) based on criticism from other standpoints—for no particular further reason beyond the fact that his reasons rest on criticisms from *his* standpoint. At the very least, this is out of line with the function of morality (or of core morality on an ought-based account) as yielding a viable code of social behavior, one that a group could be motivated to abide by. One might also question whether its underlying conception of practical reasons can be made coherent.

Let me acknowledge that there are cases of discounting moral reasons that involve *no* error—namely, cases of imperfect duties.¹⁹ A duty to give aid to those in need presumably rests on criticisms from each of the standpoints of needy individuals, rather than just from some general standpoint, but a moral agent does have authority to discount some indefinite set of them. We can get this result within the framework outlined above by taking a decision to give aid to some needy individuals as the source of an exclusionary permission, a permission to discount reasons based on the criticisms of others appealing for aid.

As I have set it up, the reasons-amoralist's error is at bottom a theoretical error, about the nature of moral reasons. It results in faulty practical reasoning, but possibly in the service of the agent's ends, on the model of cases of promoting success by inflating one's own abilities or achievements. So I would not call it practically irrational. Moreover, it occurs at such a sophisticated level that I think the reasons-amoralist is clearly no fool—except perhaps in Hobbes's sense, of the fool who has 'said in his heart' there is no justice. We can think of him as deluded, though, insofar as his error involves a grandiose sense of himself as authorized to speak for others. Instead of simply inflating his abilities in the manner of a common-variety

¹⁹ I owe thanks to Stephen Darwall for bringing up this issue.

megalomaniac, the reasons-amoralist inflates his role in relation to core moral reasons, those based on criticism from other standpoints.

REASONS AND WIDE-SCOPE OUGHTS

My preceding argument was part of an attempt to defend the view that moral 'ought' can be understood in terms of reasons, even though reasons as such may be optional. I now want to respond to a different sort of challenge that might be suggested by John Broome's recent defense of a distinction between reasons and undetachable 'wide-scope' oughts, of the sort Broome calls 'normative requirements.'²⁰ I think I can do so relatively briefly by referring to some earlier work of my own on conditional oughts.²¹

The oughts in question have the form $O(\text{if } p, \text{ then } q)$ and include, most notably, the Kantian hypothetical imperative, which requires that, if you will an end, you also will the means to it. As Broome points out, they also cover rules of theoretical reasoning, such as the requirement that, if you believe the premises of a valid argument, you also believe the conclusion. It would be natural to take wide-scope oughts to cover moral rules as well, such as the rule requiring that, if you make a promise, you keep it. Surely these count as normative requirements.

Broome tells us that wide-scope oughts do not admit of detachment; that is, we cannot apply modus ponens to $O(\text{if } p, \text{ then } q)$ to derive Oq if we simply grant that p is true, since making p false represents an alternative way for the agent to satisfy the requirement, even if it is an option he in fact turns down. In the case of the hypothetical imperative, he does not necessarily have to take the means to what in fact is his end; he has the option of repudiating the end instead. But Broome distinguishes between normative requirements and reasons in that reasons are *pro tanto* and need to be weighed against competitors. So a rational agent can act against a reason by appeal to countervailing considerations. By contrast, if an agent neither repudiates his end nor takes the means to it, that is enough to

²⁰ See Broome (2004). Broome interprets 'ought' in a relatively weak sense, common in ordinary language, as conveying recommendation rather than requirement—in contrast to the usual interpretation of *moral* 'ought' as having the force of a command. I of course assume the stronger interpretation here, but I should think it also fits the wide-scope oughts concerning logical rules that Broome has in mind.

²¹ See Greenspan (1975). For discussion of surrounding issues about 'ought,' 'obligation,' and deontic logic (but on the basis of a picture of oughts as essentially action-guiding); cf. Greenspan (1972). From email correspondence I gather that Broome would accept at least some of the limitations on his argument that I argue for below.

warrant a judgment of irrationality.²² While the fact that something is a means to our ends might give us *reason* to will it, then, we could not derive a narrow-scope requirement to that effect.

We might be tempted to conclude from this argument that no set of reasons, however structured and qualified, could possibly add up to a moral ought. But if we look more closely at the application of wide-scope oughts to moral requirements like promise-keeping, I think we will want to qualify both Broome's claims about detachment and his distinction between reasons and normative requirements. An ought conditional on something, such as the making of a promise, that is already settled by the time assigned to the act it conditionally requires does admit of detachment. Once the antecedent is no longer capable of being falsified—the promise already has been made—one of the agent's two options for satisfying the conditional will be closed off. The only way of satisfying it, then, will be to do the act in question—keep the promise.

Of course, a full representation of the conditional ought relevant to promise-keeping will be more complex than this, with further conditions specifying that one has not been released from the promise, among other things. But the agent cannot simply falsify such further conditions at will, in the way he normally can repudiate an end (or belief in the premisses of an argument). So here we have what my argument in earlier work referred to as a 'time-bound' ought, as distinct from the timeless instances of logical rules that are the basis for Broome's argument. In Broome's cases of normative requirement—for which '*logical* requirement' might be a better term (with the hypothetical imperative seen as a logical requirement of practical reasoning)—it is my *current* ends and beliefs, not what I wanted or believed at some earlier time, that are assumed to dictate what I should do or believe now.

To return to the case of promise-keeping: this also seems to involve a wide-scope ought that is subject to comparison of strengths with conflicting oughts that might defeat it, on the model Broome apparently restricts to reasons. Since the term 'pro tanto' applies more naturally to reasons, we might revert to Ross's terminology for duties and refer to these as 'prima facie' oughts. For instance, in Plato's case (*Republic* 331c5–9) of the agent who has to decide whether to return borrowed weapons to someone who has gone berserk, *O*(if he promises to return weapons, then he returns them) would seem to be defeated by a competing prima facie ought: *O*~(he gives

²² There might be cases of 'rational irrationality,' though, where that instance of irrationality is in his long-term interests—perhaps because someone has offered him a large reward for violating the hypothetical imperative. Broome (2004: 43–5) discusses a parallel point for belief made by Andrew Reisner.

weapons to a lunatic). For that matter, it makes perfect sense to consider reasons for and against having or accepting rules like promise-keeping—for or against taking them *as* normative requirements—in contrast to logical requirements, for which Broome has a point in dismissing the notion of weighing reasons.

There are other distinctions to be drawn between reasons and oughts, some of them relevant to the critical conception of reasons, as defended in this paper. First, note that my argument above for narrowing ‘ought’ in time-bound cases to options still open to the agent applies only to present-tense statements of ‘ought-to-do’—as opposed to statements about what one ought to have done, what ought to be the case, or the like. It depends on taking time-bound ‘ought’ as indeed essentially action-guiding, in contrast to reasons generally, on the critical conception. There is a corresponding subset of reasons, of course—reasons *to do* something—but according to the critical conception the class of reasons bearing on a given act extends wider. There is no time-limit on assessing an act in light of criticism.

Further, a reason seems to be detachable even in cases where the corresponding narrow-scope ought is not, since the condition on the normative requirement in question is not yet satisfied.²³ My pursuit of a certain end, most notably, does give me a *reason* to take the necessary means to it, even though I also have the option of repudiating the end instead. If I did repudiate it, I would no longer have the reason, but the mere fact that I might repudiate it leaves the reason in force—as a pro tanto consideration against failing to take the means. Still, framing the hypothetical imperative as an action-guiding wide-scope ‘ought’ is useful in defense of the critical conception of reasons, since it explains how a reason to achieve one’s ends can be seen as a response to criticism.²⁴ The relevant criticism is directed toward a conjunction—pursuing the end without taking the means—from which we can detach a reason, though not a requirement.

I should also note that there is also another form of detachment applicable to wide-scope oughts, besides the one modeled on modus ponens, that I call deontic (as opposed to factual) detachment.²⁵ The basic idea here is that an ought-statement *requiring* (rather than asserting) the truth of the antecedent of a conditional or wide-scope ought would also allow us to detach an ought-statement of the consequent. From an instance of the hypothetical imperative, *O*(if I want to provide for my old age, I save some money), we need only grant that I *ought* to want to provide for my old

²³ See the argument for this point in Raz (2005: 12–13).

²⁴ Let me thank Gunnar Björnsson for pressing this point in comments on Greenspan (unpublished-b).

²⁵ See Greenspan (1975: 260).

age, whether or not I actually want to, in order to detach a requirement that I save some money. Broome (in personal correspondence) poses the following as a counterexample to deontic detachment: *O*(if you go running, you wear your running shoes) and *O*(you go running) would let us detach *O*(you wear your running shoes)—which is implausible if you are not going running and have no intention of doing so. But I think this can be handled if we recognize oughts as time-bound in the way I sketched above.

To make contact with my deontic detachment principle, Broome's ought-statements here need to be restated a bit, so that it is your *intention* of going running (or your wanting to, having that end, or the like) that requires putting on the shoes. Once we do this, however, I think that the claim that you ought to wear your running shoes will not seem so implausible as he suggests. Really, we would say, what you ought to do is decide to go running and put on the shoes before you go.²⁶ While it is still possible for you to put on the shoes and go running in them, we can detach a requirement that you put them on, as your first step toward acting appropriately on the intention you ought to have to go running in the shoes. If we know that in fact you are not going to form the intention to go running, we might also say that you should not put on the shoes, but I would take this as short for a conditional ought—*O*(if you do not want to go running, you do not wear your running shoes)—that does not allow detachment, since the antecedent is neither required nor settled (even if true) *at times when you can still satisfy the conditional*. So we can apply deontic detachment to Broome's case, as long as we recognize appropriate limits on factual detachment.

In application to moral oughts, then, Broome's argument from normative requirements as wide-scope oughts shows only that we could not get a moral requirement from a wide-scope ought conditional on ends that the agent can *and may* still repudiate at the time assigned to action. Besides past acts, such as promises, any necessary features of human nature or of agency or the like, including ends, would let us detach narrow-scope or unconditional oughts by factual detachment. A Kantian approach to ethics might be seen as working from an a priori version of this model of factual necessity. However, a deontic detachment model, making out the basis for morality as normative through-and-through, would provide

²⁶ I defend a claim of this sort in Greenspan (1978); note that the trees on pp. 78–9 are reversed. It sounds odd to apply 'ought' directly to forming an intention, so I apply it here to making a decision—and we also apply it to adopting an end, making a plan, and the like—as a way of generating an intention, though typically at some distance in time from what it is an intention to do. Note that the intention in question in the running case is to not to run immediately, but to do something else first (put on the shoes).

an alternative interpretation of Kant's talk of morality as holding for rational agents as such, on the assumption that certain ends are required by rationality.

There are general ends such as interpersonal coordination that would seem to be required to facilitate fulfillment of whatever other, more specific ends an agent should happen to adopt.²⁷ For that matter, the Strawsonian ideal of mutual recognition in a community of persons, as suggested by Kant's 'kingdom of ends,' is invoked in recent work by Scanlon, among others, as something valuable in itself.²⁸ Selected agents like the reasons-amoralist may be able to do well for themselves without adhering to some such ideal, but relying on this ability is risky, at best. However, if oughts are to be understood in terms of practical reasons, and practical reasons are interpreted in accordance with the critical conception, this or some similar basis for ethics could not be described solely in the language of positive value, as talk of ideals might suggest, but would also have to refer to something negative: respect for persons *as* sources of *criticism*.

What displaced attention to moral 'ought' in recent years was the move on the part of a number of philosophers back to virtue ethics, with its preference for the language of positive value.²⁹ There was Anscombe's well-known dismissal of 'ought' as empty without belief in a divine lawgiver.³⁰ Perhaps relatedly, some philosophers thought of notions of moral duty or obligation as motivating only by way of some sort of extrinsic threat—of divine or legal punishment, social censure or emotional guilt—that compromised the value of the moral motive. However, by interpreting 'ought' in terms of practical reasons, understood as referring to criticism from other persons' standpoints, we can both bring the notion down to earth and connect it to a sanction that being morally motivated just *means* wanting to avoid.

²⁷ Cf. Bratman (2001: 207), for a defense of cross-temporal consistency and other elements of planning agency as a 'universal means' (though not particularly in reference to ethics). Something similar would seem to fit ideals of identity or integrity, of the sort proposed as a Kantian basis for morality in Korsgaard (1996: 101 ff.). But while all agents necessarily have some ends or other, it is not clear that all accept ideals of identity or integrity. To get by Broome's arguments and allow for detachment, then, we would apparently need to treat such ideals as ends everyone *ought* to have—perhaps rationally, but not just as a consequence of the hypothetical imperative plus agents' actual ends.

²⁸ See Scanlon (1998: esp. p. 163); cf. Strawson (1959: ch. 3) and (1962).

²⁹ But cf. Thomson (this volume), for what seems to amount to a negative version of virtue ethics—Thomson calls it 'vice ethics'—that is set up to generate oughts. In discussion at the Wisconsin Metaethics Workshop, however, it turned out that a single ought-violation would be enough to make one's character defective in Thomson's intended sense; so I think the approach might instead be seen as a version of duty ethics that hinges in a serious way on virtue-ethical notions.

³⁰ See Anscombe (1981: 26–42, p. 37).

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